

Tobin Keller (Sean Penn) and Silvia Broome (Nicole Kidman) meet to say good-bye.



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Dictatorship vs. Idealism

Safe international saga disappoints

THE INTERPRETER: Directed by Sydney Pollack. Written by Charles Randolph, Scott Frank, Steven Zaillian, based on a story by Martin Stellman and Brian Ward. Produced by Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Kevin Misher. Executive producers Anthony Minghella, Sydney Pollack, G. Mac Brown. Cinematography, Darius Khondji. Production design, Jon Hutman. Editor, William Steinkamp. Costume design, Sarah Edwards. Music, James Newton Howard. Starring Nicole Kidman and Sean Penn, with Catherine Keener. Also, Jesper Christensen, Yvan Attal, Earl Cameron. Universal Pictures, 2005. PG-13. 123 minutes.

Sydne Pollack's new political thriller is a smart-looking production, shot outside and within the grand modernist United Nations building in New York — as elegant and idealistic as interpreter Silvia Broome (Nicole Kidman) herself. Born in the fictional Africa nation of Matobo to English farmers but educated in Europe, Silvia is of two minds. She bears the intellectual burden of understanding what has happened to her native country but hopes for justice within the international community, much like writer Nadine Gordimer in apartheid South Africa, for example. But Silvia has also suffered from the criminal madness of the former liberator turned despotic ruler for life, Dr. Zuwanie (Earl Cameron), and those experiences are real and recent.

One evening after a forced evacuation of the U.N. building, Silvia returns to retrieve her African flutes from her booth perched above the General Assembly. In the dark, she accidentally overhears a whispered conversation that sounds suspiciously like a death threat against Zuwanie, who is coming to address the U.N. in a few days. Compounding her fear, Silvia is observed by unseen others.

Enter Tobin Keller (Sean Penn), a Secret Service agent assigned to Silvia's case, and his partner, Agent Dot Woods (Catherine Keener). His split is to find out everything about Silvia while simultaneously building her trust. Nursing his own recent loss, Tobin is both tough and tender with Silvia, while Dot gets off the sardonic witticisms that suit her personality.

The film's weakness is a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth. The script was concocted from the efforts of five writers, only two with worthy screen credentials. The story idea belongs to Martin Stellman and Brian Ward, whose previous joint effort was an adventure fantasy TV series for kids called "Shoebox

Zoo." Screenwriter Charles Randolph claims *The Life of David Gale*, which was a despicable piece of work. But Scott Frank and Steven Zaillian each have credits. Frank's clever "Karen Sisco" deserved more seasons than it got; big screen scores include *Minority Report*, *Get Shorty*, *Out of Sight*. Zaillian claims *Gangs of New York*, *Schindler's List* and *Searching for Bobby Fischer*.

The sinkhole created by the script bomb probably wasn't fixable, because director, producer Sydney Pollack intended to make a commercially successful film. So there is a simmering attraction between Silvia and Tobin, a break-in at Silvia's by an African mask-wearing intruder, sentimental moments of looking at photos from the past, and lots of heady discourse about language. As an interpreter, Silvia believes in the power of words, while Tobin doesn't see the difference between "gone" and "dead" for example and uses them interchangeably.

So where's the live-wire internal conflict that the U.N. is racked with on almost every ethical question of any merit? The dithering in the face of national catastrophes such as ethnic cleansing in the Balkans? Its refusal to intervene in blatant African genocide such as Rwanda? Our country's parsimony — diplomatic blackmail — about paying our dues unless we get our way? The likely selection of a U.N.-hater to be the spokesperson to the world body for you and me? Not here.

The inspired co-starring of Kidman and Penn bears fruit, but their early scenes promise more punch than is delivered. The film would have been cheapened by a romantic tumble in the hay, but more spirited exchanges between them need not have been physical. The film's best moments come on an action-packed bus ride, during which Silvia cheekily confronts one of Zuwanie's rivals (George Harris), a businessman.

While the film is a disappointment, I don't actively dislike it. Pollack is too good a craftsman to make a really bad film. Kidman and Penn deliver nuanced, intelligent line readings, and it's a pleasure to watch professional actors doing their best to raise the level of the work. Now playing at Cinemark and Cinema World, the film is helped by their performances. **CW**

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